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BUSINESS ENGLISH OR ENGLISH IN BUSINESS?

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I have taught three years in a city high school without yet having been assigned, for more than two periods during a single semester, to teach the subject which I was trained to teach. I do not mention this truth as a protest; for two years experimenting in Commercial Correspondence has given me faith in the possibilities of the "untrained" teacher. It sometimes happens that the amateur is a more discerning critic than the expert. My Master's degree did not secure me "my place in the sun"; will my experience entitle me to an opinion?

When I was told to teach Commercial Correspondence, I sought textbooks for my first initiation into a strange subject. A long, thin book of technical appearance acquainted me with the scope. The first half of the book was familiar stuff. A digest of Woolley's *Handbook of Composition*, some stale illustrations of rules for commas, and a list of business abbreviations—f.o.b., c.o.d., etc.—loomed large. Some instructions about letterheads and salutations reminded me that a letter had a "form" of its own and a brief classification of "kinds of letters" surveyed for me the business man's daily correspondence. There were letters from lumber companies, trust companies, grocers, and tailors, ordering, complaining, or acknowledging. The book, of comparatively few pages, revealed to me, in my nervous survey, not one new idea. Where was the "new subject" I had been assigned to teach? Where was the "technique" with which I, academically trained, was not familiar? True, I might not have been able to call the "Dear Sir" a salutation, or the "Very truly yours" a "complimentary close"; but the facts were familiar.

I felt encouraged as I assigned the first half of the text—a review of familiar rules for punctuation. Somehow I felt in those early

days a bit in awe of a text and thought I must cover the pages conscientiously. Then, too, I was playing for more time in which to discover the real hidden essence of this subject. But I never found it. I assigned letters to be written, all sorts of letters. The students ordered everything I could think of—magazines, groceries, lumber, and what not; they acknowledged orders; they applied for positions in letters that tried in a weak way to express qualifications to which they did not aspire. I clung to the text in a blind respect for printed matter. But the flood of stilted paraphrasings, the “Yours of the 5th instant at hand,” “In reply to same, beg to state,” etc., convinced me of the utter futility of my teaching. Not a student but could use “ultimo,” and misuse “advise” and “kindly” with the sophisticated air of a man of business.

From the text, and from their exercises in the typewriting department, they obtained thorough training in imitation of worn-out business idioms. The idea gained in that first semester was that letter-writing was a mechanical process learned by imitating the models in the text. The substance of the letters from insurance companies, etc., was so removed from the students’ experience that they could do little else than imitate. Where was the value of such training? The students had not gained the slightest facility in original expression nor the slightest judgment in answering business communications.

The following semester I put aside, except for reference, the book of machine-made illustrations. In an endeavor to arouse students to original expression, I sought to create real situations that called for correspondence. We imagined ourselves applicants for positions we aspired to; we chose the particular business of individual preference and tried to imagine ourselves conducting it successfully; we wrote sales letters, advertising letters, using common articles, in an effort to supplant the stilted, hackneyed expression of the text. Now and then a real instinct for salesmanship expressed itself; a youth who had sold magazines wrote his experience. But the vast majority had never tried to sell anything. Most of them could not pretend or imagine because of sheer lack of substance with which to pretend. They would try, on our day of oral recitation, to sell lumber or artificial limbs—one bright

student dared thus to inject humor into a dull class—with little success. Their experience in the lumber business, in a credit department, in a trust company, was for the most part nil; their observation was scattered and meager, not close enough to their lives to enable them to build upon it. They could not exercise business judgment, tact, strategy, in situations which they could not comprehend. When the substance was lacking, what incentive for correct expression?

The following year I discarded all texts. I had secretly made up my mind previously that all the texts I had seen on commercial correspondence were totally impractical in a high-school course. They were all right, perhaps, on a business man's desk, but to a high-school student they were worthless. You cannot carry on the correspondence of a law office without some knowledge of law; you cannot learn to express any idea without first understanding the idea itself; the textbooks assume an experience on the part of the students which is not there.

For three semesters I had taught useless stuff and had silently apologized to my students. The students, I was sure, expressed in their inarticulate way a sense of futility in following my assignments. My inadequate attempts to create a "business atmosphere" were recognized. It seemed clear to me that unless one could teach business principles with materials at hand, one would not teach them at all. Expression must wait upon substance; a course in business English could be effective only when the substance to be expressed impressed the students as real and vital in their present, instead of vaguely applicable to their future.

It may be taken for granted that a course in business English ought to teach accuracy and correctness in speech and writing. That is the least a course in *any* English can do. But whether in a business English course one teaches *only* correctness, or a different kind of accuracy, or, in short, a different English entirely—as so many writers of business texts imply—is the question I wish to raise. Is there such a thing as business English after all? Would it not be a more accurate emphasis to term it "English in business"?

There always appears in the rise of any new activity or profession a sort of technical slang. For years business has had, and

has even now, its "esteemed favor," "kindly advise," "yours at hand," as expressions to impress patrons. There appears now, however, a distinct reaction against this stereotyped diction. More progressive business houses appreciate the wisdom of employing simple, natural, dignified, and appropriate words in their advertising and correspondence. The need of fluency, variety, and aptness is keenly felt in business. One business man, a manager of a correspondence department, told me that what high-school students need in their commercial course is more contact with imaginative and stimulating writers who know the value of words. "They have no vocabulary," he complained emphatically. In our present commercial course, with its emphasis placed primarily on mechanical skill, where is there opportunity for the student to acquire a vocabulary or an ability to use it creatively? Surely business of today calls for creative ability, for imagination and originality. And yet where in our commercial English courses have we given opportunity for the development of these? Correctness, of course, is needed; but just as surely there is needed a larger vocabulary, greater flexibility in use of sentences, originality in style, creative power, unless we mean to graduate stenographers who can never become secretaries, clerks who can never become buyers, bookkeepers who can never become accountants.

I have felt for some time that our continual emphasis on grammatical correctness and our continued inability to teach more than that are due to our inefficient methods. I am reminded of a contrast between business and teaching. In business, an employer does not repeat and nag; he assumes and demands. Daily harping on chronic errors is a pedagogical habit. But, to my mind, no stimulation comes from this post-mortem upon incorrect themes. Red ink is less impressive than a staunch refusal to accept a manuscript that is not up to the highest standard one can justly demand from a class. New and subtle errors may be met in class as they arise, without the stultifying effect of harping on stale errors. One paper refused because of careless spelling or punctuation impresses more than an hour of class criticism. Such discipline, if consistently carried out, ought surely to leave room for something more to be taught in a course in business English than grammatical technique.

Business students, as well as any other students, I have found, need their senses stimulated; they need to be aroused to observe and to be alive to the interesting in life. Business life, quite as much as any other phase of life, needs those who can see and understand, interpret and create.

When I first came into contact with commercial Seniors I was disheartened at the dead calm that settled over the class whenever we digressed and talked of the picturesque in business or raised a question, such as, "Does it pay to boss?" or the like. On some days I quite irrelevantly took refuge in such digressions just to resuscitate my own soul and disturb that perfect calm in front of me. Scarcely a student who had looked across St. Anthony Falls upon the Pillsbury Flour Mills silhouetted in dark, powerful shapes against a sunset sky could give expression to the feeblest sense of appreciation of that familiar scene. Mills and flour and machinery suggested no possibilities for the imagination. "Eventually, why not now?"—that advertising beacon of Minneapolis—possessed for them no ray of imaginative power.

I began my third year of teaching business English by assigning themes on familiar subjects with the purpose of arousing the students to observe the interesting in business life. I urged them to observe types in a street car, clever salesmen they met, scenes in stores and factories; I ransacked the town for scenes which were suggestive. I urged them to be as interesting and as entertaining in their writing as their talents permitted; I ridiculed the conventional, dull theme that was written just to "get by," and refused to accept a theme that had not been written in the student's best style. Students wrote themes that described their summer "boss," they wrote their experiences behind the counter, or they reproduced scenes in a crowded street car. Always from such a set of themes came material worth talking about, ideas worth enlarging. The students themselves furnished me with material for theme topics. Working from their own experiences, as simple and commonplace as some of them were, we built up an interest in seeing things about us, in considering new ideas and in forming new opinions.

Once I asked a particularly inarticulate student what she thought of a theme that had just been read, whether she had

enjoyed it. She blushed in a confused fashion, wrinkled her brows in a futile attempt to formulate a decision, and then said, "Why, I don't know."

"Do you like mince pie?" I asked her, not heeding her astonishment at the question.

"Why, yes," she admitted.

"Then surely you can figure out such a simple problem in preference as telling me whether you liked the paper just read."

Too many students graduate without ever sensing their obligation to form definite and positive opinions. I next urged my students to assume a positive attitude toward simple questions that they would some day be forced to decide. I took subjects that fell within the students' range of observation, if not within their actual experience. Very likely the students had brothers and sisters who worked, and they had undoubtedly heard such subjects as uniform dress for working women, "bluff" in business, the personality of an ideal secretary, and the like, discussed around the dinner table. Every student had in some way come in contact with the working world and could form tentative opinions on such subjects.

Business men have frequently complained in my hearing that high-school graduates who immediately become stenographers show no powers of judgment; they are even unwilling to attempt the simplest sort of independent judgment. I tried in another set of theme topics to awaken mental initiative; I took situations from the business world, applied them specifically to the experience of the individual student, and let the student flounder toward some sort of rational decision. What you would do if your work was finished an hour before closing time, if your employer dictated a letter full of grammatical errors, if your customer asked for an article that you were out of, were some of the simple questions raised. It was surprising to find how complex these situations became once we stopped to consider all the "ifs" the students themselves raised.

Argumentative topics created much animation in the class. We discussed whether men and women should receive the same wages for equivalent work; whether service rendered, rather than time spent, would not be a better basis for wages; whether honesty

was good advertising for a merchant, and so on. I remember that one wild discussion which revolved around Henry Ford and his methods became so heated and so earnest that I felt for the moment that the conflagration I had deliberately fanned into being was getting beyond my control.

For oral work we used to dramatize all sorts of business situations. Personal interviews, personal complaints, personal applications, all simple and based upon the actual experiences of some of the members of the class, afforded scenes for these little dramas of everyday life. Conversations over the telephone were successful, once the students lost their self-consciousness. I recall one very well-acted interview. A "mature" young girl of "seventeen" tried to convince a stubborn candy-store manager that her age alone should not bar her from the position of clerk for which she was applying. For the first five minutes the manager was obdurate, expressing his positive reasons splendidly, much to the interest of the class. Finally the girl persuaded him and in the end won the position.

"The business of going to school" was a favorite hobby of mine. I tried to exact the same sort of punctuality, the same business-like accuracy, that an employer would. I compared credits to wages and attempted to instil a hearty respect for the job well done and the payment earned. And we gathered up in our class assignments all the real business that went on about the school and tried to use it to teach us business principles. We wrote letters to the principal asking special permission for this and that, to teachers asking for letters of recommendation; we conducted part of the correspondence of the school annual, and the school paper. We advertised the class play and wrote form letters to the alumni. I had the students answer all the business letters that came to me which were not beyond their powers. The student whose letter was actually sent out was always highly pleased. Once I let the class do some canvassing that I was asked to do for the Suffrage Party in Minneapolis. We used this experience as material on which to talk about an easy approach in salesmanship, human nature from the point of view of the agent, and so on.

During the semester we tried one long theme on a subject that required the massing together of information. The students

visited a bank, a post-office, and a newspaper office. We wrote about markets, employment agencies—the newest sort where physiognomy plays an important part—and advertising. We incorporated such material as we could find into “The Life of a Bank Check,” “The Diary of a Single Advertisement,” “A Movie of Market Street,” “The Adventures of a Parcel.”

I tried also—and this is my last experiment—to interest students in the wealth of new material that is being written on business themes by the better modern writers of repute. Our bibliography contained such names as Ida Tarbell, Hugh Black, Theodore Roosevelt, O. S. Marden, George Horace Lorimer. My latest assignment, the success of which I cannot as yet vouch for, is to have the students try to sell to the other members of the class the book that they have chosen to read for the month.

These suggestions are in reality little more than suggestions for a course in rhetoric, old-fashioned rhetoric, emphasizing a particular phase of life as its primary field, but not however, be it said, to the absolute exclusion of other phases. As a business man wrote in *System*, a salesman can use every scrap of knowledge he has, from economics to art. The same I believe holds true for the “mere” business man or woman. I aimed to teach students, not only something about a life of business, but as much as I could about the business of living while in business; I tried to stimulate an enthusiasm for the broader and finer things in business; I aimed to be practical in using this material for the teaching of better English. But I had to find the idea before I could teach the form in which to put the idea; I felt that all my raging against inaccuracy had been but a testimony to the emptiness of my material.